

Commentary

What the Artist Sees and Paints

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Figure 1.—A painting by Goya shows the Infanta Maria Josefa with what appears to be a melanoma.

(White LP: What the artist sees and paints. *West J Med* 1995; 163:84-85)

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Reprints are not available.

In the years 1800 to 1801, Francisco de Goya painted a large group portrait of the family of King Charles IV of Spain. Included in this group is the king's sister, the Infanta Maria Josefa, aged 56 years. On her right temple is a large, black tumor, probably a melanoma, arising in what was surely a lentigo maligna.¹ One can see the raised edges of this tumor.² It is reported that the Infanta died of unspecified causes six months after the painting was completed. For several reasons the cause of her death is speculative and not certain.

Artists often see and paint reality before physicians or scientists recognize reality.³

Melanoma is an old and familiar disease. Hippocrates was said to have described it, but he did not. He must have seen it. It was first recognized as cancer in 1781; Gioanni Carlo Brugnone, a veterinarian in Torino, Italy, described the condition in horses, usually old gray horses.⁴ It was first recognized as a distinct cancer in humans by René Laennec in 1807,⁵ although Everard Home in 1805 described a number of cases of cancer,⁶ one of which was shown years later to have been a melanoma. The introduction of the use of the light microscope in pathology in the middle of the 19th cen-

tury began the modern delineation of melanoma in humans.^{7,8}

One of the reasons Goya is one of the world's great painters is that he painted portraits, blemishes and all. In this instance he appears to have painted a royal princess, cancer and all. Most artists covered over the spots and showed us in their finished works only cleaned-up versions. Goya was different. It appears that he painted a portrait of a woman with a melanoma six years before one of our most careful and important physicians first described the disease.

REFERENCES

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Scrutability

Tu Fu, old and ravaged by consumption,
bent over his mulberry paper and wrote
the characters "single" and "wild goose,"
his eyes weakened by the moonlight.

Because it was October in his life,
he refilled his cup with wine.
His joys were neither large nor many.
But they were precise.

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